Morning Sit and Q&A

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 14:46

How is feeling tone different from mood? If I wake up on the wrong side of the bed and everything pisses me off, is feeling tone primarily a way to avoid personalizing—using "me" or "mine"—or is it something else entirely?

This is an important question. I think the English word "feeling" leads to some of the confusion. We try to use "feeling tone" now because vedana used to be translated simply as "feeling." But we use "feeling" in English for moods and states of mind, and vedana is not that.

Vedana is that very specific, subtle feeling of each sense experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, experienced in the mind very quickly. It's only that. And as I've said—I gave a whole talk on this—without recognition, without mindfulness, vedana can so easily lead into wanting or aversion or confusion, and that can give rise to all kinds of moods or states of mind.

Moods and states of mind belong to the third foundation, citta. That's really whatever qualities are present in a moment of consciousness. So knowing the citta means knowing the mind that has samadhi present or the mind that doesn't, knowing the mind that's pissed off with everything or the mind that's not.

So mood is different from feeling tone—they're separate, different things. And mood itself can be pleasant, wholesome, unpleasant, or neutral. Being mindful of the mood in the moment when you wake up feeling all grumpy: each moment of grumpiness, that mental mood, might come with an unpleasant feeling tone that's perceived or not. When it's not perceived, it's just grumpy, grumpy, grumpy.

Using feeling tone to be present without personalizing is a great tool. But we can also cling to feeling tone. As Roxanne spoke about in the five aggregates of clinging, vedana is one of them. It's true, it's a little less personal. "I'm so grumpy, the world stinks, and it's everybody else's fault"—that's a little easier to identify with than simply noting "unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant." But we can identify with anything if we try hard enough.

So tuning into feeling tone first makes it a little easier not to personalize, but the key thing is helping us see the whole cause and effect: how vedana leads into wanting or aversion, how that leads into mood, how that leads into a sense of "me." Seeing that whole cause and effect with mindfulness is what really helps cut through the personalization. In any moment, any experience recognized clearly with mindfulness doesn't have to have a "me" or "mine" in it.

Hopefully that clarifies the difference between vedana and mood, the mental states. You'd see mood in citta.

The second question follows on from this, about the five aggregates. Someone named them as Roxanne did: form, consciousness, perception, feeling tone, thoughts and volition. This person says, "I don't see body, kaya, nor heart-mind, citta, in this list."

This is just another word thing. Rupa means all material form—the body, the five physical senses, and all external rupa. That is kaya, that is body. It's in there under rupa, all material form. Kaya is another word; I'm talking about our particular physical body, but rupa is all material form.

"I don't see heart-mind, citta, in that list." All the other four aggregates are citta. Citta is—I think Guy likes to call it "psyche" sometimes. It's really like a moment of consciousness arising in every moment. And citta, the third foundation of mindfulness, is recognizing in that moment of consciousness what concomitants are present, what's arising together with that moment of consciousness. All of the other three—the sankharas, perception, and sanya—are arising in that moment.

I don't know why the Buddha broke out sanya and vedana from sankhara, but they're arising as sankhara. Maybe just to highlight the importance of their function, to help us notice them.

So citta, heart and mind—we've been using "heart and mind" just because that's a kind of Western division that isn't there in citta. It's not saying the mind is thinking and the heart is emotions. It's not that.

Citta is a moment of consciousness with whatever's arising. Whatever states of heart and mind—perception arising, sanya arising, vedana arising in every moment, some sort of volition and thoughts and moods in a moment of consciousness—all of that is citta. So it's just a different way of describing the same thing. I hope that helps a little bit.

The one thing I do want to say is this: we offer these lists, these different angles of looking at our experience, really breaking it down, and of course they can at times depersonalize it. They do help us, when the attention is steady, to see more clearly the cause and effect relationship. And at other times, it drives you bonkers. You're looking for all these different things and really what's happening is a big feeling of fear. And you're trying to go, "Oh, I fear," and it's huge, and you think, "No, but I've got to notice the citta, I've got to notice the vedana, what's the perception?" and you're making yourself nuts. What's actually happening now? It's like this.

So sometimes the more subtle lists are really interesting. They naturally draw the attention. Maybe some days you're just naturally noticing vedana. But then the next day you think, "I should notice vedana," but that's not what's happening, and you're trying.

Choiceless awareness is really what's happening now. Allow your mindful attention to just drop in, without resistance, to what's happening now—really subtle and fine, or big and gross. And you think, "Oh, I'm going backwards." No, there's no forwards. There's no backwards. There's one line from Sayadaw U Tejaniya that I really like in one of his books. He said, "Reality has no direction." So if you think you're going forward or backward—total concept. Because it's only now.

So use these concepts, these pointings. They can be really helpful. But if you're getting all caught up in the mentality of it at that time, no. Let yourself just drop into, with your awareness, with your attention, what's actually happening now. Very simply. We all go through different times in practice.

One other question that I think is important: "When someone is sick, is it better to send metta or karuna? Do you think it can have an effect on them?"

I think this is something we really wonder about. First, in terms of the formal style of Brahmavihara practice, karuna practice is practiced in the same way as we've been offering the metta. The difference is that they are different qualities of heart-mind, different mental factors. They feel a little different. They're both beautiful. Don't think, "Oh God, I shouldn't be feeling metta, it's karuna." They're both beautiful. Take either one that comes.

But the way they work—like metta, as we say, its proximate cause in a moment, the immediate cause of it arising in the next moment of citta, is seeing the good and appreciating it. With karuna, compassion, it's said to be in this style: that quality of open, connected attention—you could say met attention—connects with the suffering aspect of the being. Instead of focusing on the good, the suffering aspect is apparent, and that's what this open kind attention connects with. That's the proximate cause for karuna to arise, sometimes described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering.

So there are different qualities of heart and mind. You can experience the difference. Both are good. You might see what's easier for you. For me, if the suffering aspect of someone is coming up, my attention connects with it, and karuna is what automatically comes.

But you can explore and see for yourself. That's the difference. If I'm feeling that somebody's sick and my attention goes to them, karuna would naturally come. Even if I were using metaphors, karuna is the feeling that comes. But don't try to make it right or wrong. Just explore.

And this next question: do you think it can have an effect on them? This, I think, is an important question, and I hope I can explain it clearly. It gets into what we're doing when we offer metta or compassion. We're focusing—it's all in us, right? There's the idea of a being, and as if sending something to them. But the motivation isn't sending something to them to make them different. The motivation of cultivating these qualities is to deepen, to recognize that quality arising now in our own mind and heart.

It's not a selfish thing. You know, sometimes people think, "Oh, it's selfish if I'm not sending it to them." But then the motivation isn't quite metta. It isn't quite karuna. There's a little offness. There's a little wanting some result. And as soon as there's wanting some result, there can still be some metta, some karuna, but it's not that purity. It's not quite it. It's not about the result.

This is tricky because of our language. I'm saying, "May you be free from suffering." Yes. But it's the heart and mind that's connected with the suffering, that's quivering with it—not demanding that it be fixed. That doesn't mean in life, if we really feel someone suffering and there's something we could do, that we

shouldn't act. That clarity of karuna without any wanting in it can be the motivation that gives rise to appropriate action. And we can recognize what's appropriate action much more clearly when it's not me wanting them to get better. You can do something really thinking you're helping, wanting them to get better, but that little bit of wanting gets in the way of seeing clearly.

So when we're doing this practice, it's not to make something happen. Whether they can feel it or not, who the heck knows? We all have opinions. I do think sometimes it happens, but as soon as you want it to, you're off, right? So that's the trick. Remember, it's really purifying the habits of our own mind and heart. And if the thought comes up that this is selfish, that's a habit of negativity to notice. That's what we're purifying. Don't believe it. Don't believe everyone else should have metta but not you because you're the worst being on the planet and you're just being selfish sending metta to yourself. So you'll take this grumpiness, this negativity toward yourself, and send metta to everyone else, but behind it is this negativity toward yourself. No, bring it into yourself, for God's sake. Start there. Go back there.

It is said that if the mind is really, really super concentrated—like Buddha level—that one could actually send metta. There's a story that the Buddha sent metta to a charging elephant and it felt the metta and stopped. I don't think we're at that level, so let's not try it. Let's just stay real. But the power of this practice is beyond our imagining. Still, don't get woo-woo—don't get all magical thinking about it. What's happening now? Right now? Simple karuna is a beautiful, beautiful thing. So is simple metta.

Sensation. *That's so boring*—I want all this amazing stuff! But pressure. Tingling. Coolness. Curiosity. That's it. All day long. Enjoy.

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